

ALLIANCE LOOKS TO UNLOCK ENERGY POTENTIAL

By Erin Madison

Northcentral Montana is sparsely populated but has huge energy potential, an expert told members of the National 25x'25 Alliance Steering Committee on Wednesday. Northcentral Montana has the potential for wind, oil and gas, coal and thermal energy, said Greg Kegel, dean of the College of Technological Sciences at Montana State University-Northern. It already has a huge natural gas pipeline that runs through it.

Northcentral Montana has the potential for wind, oil and gas, coal and thermal energy, said Greg Kegel, dean of the College of Technological Sciences at Montana State University-Northern. It already has a huge natural gas pipeline that runs through it.

"We are rich in energy," Kegel said.

The 25x'25 alliance spent Wednesday touring the Hi-Line, visiting energy-related projects.

The alliance is working toward the national policy of supplying 25 percent of the nation's energy needs through renewable energy by 2025.

The group visited MSU-Northern's Applied Technology Center, where researchers are looking at the effects of fuel additives on emissions, engine efficiency and wear and tear.

One of the hurdles central Montana and MSU-Northern are facing is a declining population in the region, Kegel said. Part of the goal of the Applied Technology Center, which opened three years ago, is to help develop potential industries for the area.

"The idea there was to bring people back into this region," Kegel said.

Northern's Applied Technology Center has been seeing increased interest in its research as fuel prices have increased.

After seeing some of the test engines in action and looking at biofuel made from camelina, a Montana-grown crop, the green energy experts listened to a panel discussion on wind energy.

Ed DeMeo, co-chairman of the 20% Wind Energy by 2030 Advisory Group, spoke about the feasibility, challenges, costs and benefits of getting 20 percent of electricity through wind energy by 2030.

The 20% Wind Energy by 2030 group spent 18 months looking at what wind energy could contribute to energy security, economic prosperity and sustainability of the natural environment, DeMeo said.

The group compared two scenarios, one in which 20 percent of electricity is generated by wind by 2030, and one in which there is no new wind development after 2006. The cost of the 20 percent wind scenario works out to be \$43 billion more than the no-wind scenario. However, that would only amount to an increase of 50 cents per month for the average person paying for electricity, DeMeo said.

The wind scenario would also create an 11 percent reduction in natural gas consumption and would reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 825 million tons.

It would also result in \$400 billion in economic development, including 150,000 jobs for manufacturing, construction and operations.

"This is a feasible scenario," DeMeo said. "We no longer have to ask can it be done. The question is what do we have to do to make it happen."

One of the things that has to be done to make wind or other renewable energy a possibility is increasing transmission capabilities, said John Etchart of Gallatin Public Affairs, a consulting group working on the Montana-Alberta Tie Line.

If the country is going to reach the 25x'25 goal, it needs to come to grips with how hard it is to develop transmission lines, Etchart said.

The MATL project has already run up a \$55 million bill without any ground being broken, he said. The permitting process has taken four years, but Etchart predicts it will be complete in the next 90 days.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer has been an "active, effective, noisy advocate of this project," and it still has been full of delays and uncertainty, Etchart said.

Overall, the project will cost \$200 billion and will span 215 miles between Great Falls and Lethbridge.

MATL has worked with several hundred landowners to make the project a reality, Etchart said.

Following their time in Havre, the group headed to Chester to visit Earl Fisher Biofuels, then toured the Craig Henke Bio-Active System at Henke Farms in south Chester.

The steering committee was invited to Montana by Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone, a member of the committee.